



California State Parks Video Transcript



Mount Tamalpais' East Peak: A Million Dollar View of the Bay Area

My name is Jim Van Cott, and I'm a ranger with California State Parks. Today we're on the top of Mount Tamalpais located in Marin County. Mount Tamalpais, first established in 1927, is one of the first state parks in California and chosen because of its natural and cultural heritage. Today, Mount Tamalpais makes up over 8,000 acres and is a shared responsibility between the National Park System, Marin Open Space, and the Marin Municipal Water District.

Perhaps one of the most significant features of the mountain is not the fact that it has a modest elevation of 2,500 feet, but that it starts at the Pacific Tidal Zone, climbing through the redwood forest and fern canyons, passing through oak woodlands and some of our last natural grasslands, and up into the chaparral zone. "Mount Tam," referred to by locals, has been an inspiration, from our first Native Americans, known as the Miwoks, to present day visitors and distinguished guests. At the top of the mountain, visitors can enjoy a visitor center, where volunteers interpret our cultural history, the flora and fauna, view a gravity car barn featuring a gravity car, or enjoy a 7/10-mile loop trail. Restrooms, public phone, and snack bar are located nearby.

Today we'll be touring that trail known as the Verna Dunshee. Verna Dunshee, distinguished guest and volunteer, was known for her conservation efforts from 1920 to 1973. She was a member of several volunteer organizations and associations, known as a honorary member of the State Park Rangers Association, and cherished for her resolution of commendation from the California State Senate. The tour that we'll be going on today is named after her. Let's begin the tour.

We're now standing on the platform where visitors can enjoy panoramic views and vistas. Many people ask, "Why the word Tamalpais?" The name Tamalpais, as much as our research teams can find from universities and linguistics specialists, is two words from our Native American Miwoks. The word "Tamal," referring to people of the west, and "Pais," meaning mountain—thus, people of the west mountain.

I'd like you to now close your eyes and imagine that it's 1896. You've just read in the paper that there's going to be the Mill Valley and Mount Tamalpais Scenic Railway being constructed to travel up the mountain. Imagine no cars. The only access has been hiking in the past. Now go ahead and open your eyes. In that same year of 1896, construction began in February, and by August, in only six months, the first train made it to the top. At the top, where we're standing, visitors enjoyed a tavern, which serviced the railway. Visitors could enjoy fine dining, and off to the left, where our present-day parking lot is, there was a dance pavilion with

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live music. The railway itself, billed as the “Crookedest Railway in the World” and the “Longest Rollercoaster in the World,” serviced the area from 1896 to the 1930s. The railway traveled from the Mill Valley area 8.2 miles, winding its way up the mountain to an average grade of 5.2 percent and made it to the top, covering over 281 turns.

All was great until ladies that were up here dancing noticed that some of the men were hiking a little farther up the mountain and wanted the opportunity to do the same thing. So at that time they built a plank trail, placing boards across the trail, which accesses the Gardener Lookout above, and ladies were able to climb to the top just like the men. Recently, within the last few years, through California State Parks and the California Conservation Corps, that trail has been refurbished and, again, known as the Plank Trail.

Looking down below us you can see mostly chaparral—chaparral a Spanish term meaning scrubby evergreen oaks. And in the background you'll see bay and some of the larger oak trees.

The chaparral zone is made up of many drought resistant plants. Off to our right you can see manzanita. Manzanita, Spanish word for tiny red apple, has a small berry. It blooms in the spring, winter, and early summer. Has a white to purplish flower. Also, as a side note, the first Native Americans, the Miwoks, used the small berries to produce a drink that is somewhat like our common day teas. I've had an opportunity to drink this, and it's really quite good. The manzanita is also known for the red bark. Red bark has a distinctive color, and it does shed through the years. I believe it sheds at least once each season.

Off to the left another drought resistant plant is called yerba santa. It's a white flowering plant with relatively large leaves. Here you can see the shiny leaves. Sometimes these leaves will turn black with fungus. As I mentioned, with the shiny leaves a black fungus will appear throughout the year and it grows right on the leaf, but also that shiny leaf notes that the plant itself has a grease or shiny-type quality that, in a natural fire that would come through, would produce great smoke.

Here you see the monkey flower. It's a medium-sized plant with a yellow-orange flower that blooms in the spring and summer. As we walk around the trail you'll see it's common. As sticky leaf monkey flower is common in the area, there are several insects that will fly into the area and pollinate, and because it is such an abundant plant on the trail itself here, I'd imagine there's a lot of that going on.

The plant you're looking at is chamise. It's a green shrub with tiny leaves. As you can see, it blooms white in the winter. All flowering or blooming plants are part of the insect world, and I'm sure that there's some pollination going on there as well.

Off to the far distance you can see the Tiburon Peninsula. There is a ferry that accesses from Tiburon over to Angel Island, and the area that they're crossing is known as Raccoon Straits. It's about a 10- to 15-minute boat ride.

This may be the best spot to view the old railroad grade as it wound up the mountain, gaining 2,200 feet in altitude. Directly below, approximately 1,200 feet down, is what locally is called the Double Bowknot. The grade made a series of sharp turns to double back and parallel itself

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five times to gain 168 feet. The grade at no point exceeded seven percent.

The short spur that we're standing at gives a beautiful panoramic view of the bay. Starting from your right you can see the white dome shapes. These are the FAA towers. And moving gradually off to your left, of course, the Pacific Ocean, and then following the ridge down through the Mount Tam area. Moving over to the channel coming into San Francisco you can see the Marin Headlands, and just a slight little bit of blue water coming into the Golden Gate Bridge. The Golden Gate Bridge is right between the ridges almost due south. Moving off to your left you see a good view of San Francisco. Slightly off to the left is San Francisco Bay Bridge. The first body of land crossing that Bay Bridge, right in the middle, you can see Alcatraz Island. Continuing on the bridge is Treasure Island. Now moving from Treasure Island you can come across to Angel Island and the Tiburon Peninsula. Mount Diablo, is approximately 35 miles away. Moving towards us, you can see the Richmond, Oakland area, coming across the San Raphael-Richmond Bridge and the San Quentin State Penitentiary. You can also see several other Marin cities traveling up through 101.

This also is a great spot to view soaring birds. The birds that you see soaring right now are turkey vultures. They can easily be distinguished because of their bright red head. These birds that are below us are immature or young turkey vultures. The more mature adults will have a black and white feather pattern, which you can view from underneath. Also, because the ridge is so closely associated to the ocean, you can see frequently California osprey, as well as the golden eagle. After enjoying this vista and panoramic area, we're going to continue now on the trail and move to the northeastern portion of the mountain.

One of the most common seen warm-blooded animals are the mule deer. But in addition to mule deer, we also have mountain lion or cougar. And often what's mistaken as a mountain lion or cougar are the smaller version, which we call bobcats. We also see raccoons and opossum. One of the more recent discoveries, something that has just occurred, or has not occurred in over 100 years, is the return of the black bear. Evidence has shown that it has returned to the Point Reyes National Seashore, as well as, more recently, at the Tomales Bay State Park.

Mount Tamalpais, as well as most of the bay area, is part of the Franciscan Assemblage, and what has occurred is the scraping off of rocks by a subducting called the Pacific Plate. Since the Jurassic and Cretaceous time periods, volcanic activity deposited on the ocean floor, and sedimentary, has moved its way north, and here on the mountain are some of the most rare minerals found anywhere else in the bay area. These are metamorphic rock, meaning from deep down under and pressurized. The exposed hard rock around the peak is an unusual metamorphic rock extremely resistant to weathering and containing fine-grained microscopic levels of rare minerals. Lichen abounds throughout the year on these rocks. Some of the rare minerals that people are talking about are in regards to gold, which our earlier explorers, through a mine, located down below the present day ranger's office. Through a claim that was filed, they tried their luck as far as gold on the mountain and, unfortunately, didn't come up with much. Other mining on the mountain included, primarily, copper.

On the rocks you can see a light-colored coloration, this is known as lichen, and the dark-colored is moss. These two will grow throughout the year. Off to the right you can see growing out of the rocks huckleberry. Just east of the rock area that we just viewed is a tanoak

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tree. Tanoaks can be easily distinguished from a light coloration on the underside of the leaf, as well as an acorn-type nut. This tanoak is known to have tannic acid, and the nut itself would need a leaching process. In front of us we have interior live oak. This is part of the chaparral drought-resistant plant area. Distinguished by its tiny green leaves, this plant is evergreen throughout the year.

Off to the left of the trail you can see Indian paintbrush. As you can see, it's a light-colored plant blooming in the spring and known for its bright red flowers. As we continue, off to the right, you can see the Temelpa Trail. The Temelpa is part of the Native American definitions.

As we continue, looking off to the left you can see the Gardener Lookout. It's just coming over the crest. Again, this lookout tower was established first in 1901, or actually a lookout box, and it signaled incoming ships coming through the Golden Gate. The ship-to-shore radio proved that obsolete, and in 1921 the tower was first built to manage fire control. Then it was again built in 1935, and today it stands pretty much as it was built in 1935, staffed by volunteers, watching as an assistant to the Marin County Fire Department.

Below us is a washed out area. This happens seasonally. In 1982 there were heavy rains, and the water came through—you can see a little bit of the work that we've accomplished here. But traversing from the right and moving on over on the panoramic view, you can see the Marin County Open Space Area.

Here you can see what we call chinquapin. It has medium-sized leaves, light green on the top, and a tan underneath. The shrub also bears a spiny fruit. Here you can see that. It's not unlike a chestnut with a small edible nut.

Looking off to the right of the trail, again, you can see the San Pablo Bay moving off to the east. And located just below the trail, before this first ridge, is a clump of trees where you can see Douglas fir, California nutmeg, California bay, and possibly a redwood or two. Looking out to the north over the many ridges in the far distance, approximately 50 miles away is St. Helena at an elevation of over 4,300 feet. As you come back over the ridges and move off to the west, you'll see two of the Marin Municipal Water District lakes. Bon Tempe, the larger of the two, was completed in 1949, while the smaller, Lake Lagunitas, was finished in 1873. These and three other lakes provide 80 percent of Marin Municipal Water District's water resources, filled by runoff from its 21,000-acre watershed.

Standing looking to the northwest, we're now approximately 6/10-mile through the trail and coming around to the conclusion. But looking off to the west, you can see two parallel ridges. The one closest to us is known as the Bolinas Ridge and the farthest one is known as the Inverness Ridge. In between the two ridges is the San Andreas Fault. Apparently, the Pacific Plate, which is located on the west of the Inverness mountain range, is no longer subdividing. However, we are moving two inches to the north per year. It's hard to imagine that, again, back to that Jurassic and Cretaceous geological time period, that we've been moving at approximately two inches per year. I would imagine that Southern California should be up here shortly!

Looking off to the west, just below us is the Eldridge Grade. And traveling up the far side, you can see the FAA domes. These domes were first established in 1951 and used as

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communication domes for domestic traffic control. Back in 1901, there were two towers that were built about 300 feet high out of wood, and storms came through. Apparently these towers were a communication system between us and Hawaii, and when the storms came in, actually blew them down. From this point on, they were never replaced, and the other towers that you see are for domestic use.

Looking off down below to the Eldridge Grade, you can see the transition of the forest region, having Douglas fir, oaks, bays, redwoods, and moving on up into the chaparral zone off to our left.

As we're ending the tour, we're coming upon the railroad tracks. These tracks will be the location of the Gravity Car Barn that we're building. This will show the railroad memorabilia. And we also have a replica of an actual gravity car. The gravity car will sit on the tracks and, of course, the gravity barn covering it. Also in this area this was the actual area that the engines, after coming up the mountain, would pull into and then unhook the gravity cars.

This concludes the 7/10-mile loop trail known as the Verna Dunshee. I hope you've enjoyed it.

Running Time: 24:54

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